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DE RUEHPF #0664/01 2461023
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1153
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS PHNOM PENH 000664

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [KTIA](#) [CB](#)
SUBJECT: CAMBODIA'S MINISTER OF DEFENSE PREPARES FOR
WASHINGTON

REF: PHNOM PENH 638

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a September 3 call on Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Tea Banh, the Ambassador previewed the Minister's upcoming travel to Washington where he will meet Secretary of Defense Gates, congratulated the Minister on Cambodia's diplomacy with respect to the dispute over Preah Vihear, highlighted the continued strengthening of military-to-military relations, and introduced the new U.S. Embassy Defense Attache. Tea Banh expressed his commitment to reduce troops and help settle the Preah Vihear dispute peacefully. He also stressed the importance of Cambodia's upcoming Capstone training event and detailed peacekeeping operations planned for Chad and the Central African Republic. The Minister rounded out the meeting by outlining areas of defense reform and continued engagement. END SUMMARY.

Tensions Subside in Preah Vihear

¶2. (SBU) In preparation for his upcoming Washington visit, which will include a meeting with Secretary of Defense Gates, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Tea Banh provided an overview of areas of mutual interest, specifically noting the calmed situation in Preah Vihear. Tea Banh detailed the history of the dispute over Preah Vihear and recent troop reductions in the border area (Ref A). He stated that both the Thai and Cambodian sides have drawn back in order to decrease the potential of further tension. Declaring that "there is no longer a worry of conflict," Tea Banh said that some troops would remain to stand guard and maintain the area as normal, but that a large number of troops is no longer necessary. He indicated that he is optimistic about further troop reductions and redeployments away from Preah Vihear in the future. However, Tea Banh said that the lower levels within the Thai and Cambodian armed forces still need to meet in order to avoid small flare-ups.

¶3. (SBU) Decreased tensions with Thailand have resulted in small numbers of tourists returning to the Preah Vihear temple. The Ambassador congratulated the Minister on the restraint and diplomacy required to get to this point, and noted the need to fully resolve the military and border situation in order for Cambodia to take full advantage of the World Heritage site designation and to increase tourism and development in a very poor area. Tea Banh responded that both he and the Thai Minister of Defense will meet to discuss and find solutions to the border issues in order to create an open area in Preah Vihear for development, trade and business. He said that Cambodians are already beginning to move and build houses along a better-understood border, and he is optimistic that there will soon be a defined border

with Thailand.

Increased Military-to-Military Relations

14. (SBU) Both the Ambassador and the Minister praised the strong and growing military-to-military relations between Cambodia and the United States. Tea Banh specifically expressed his appreciation of U.S. assistance with the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). He stated that his office is working closely with the Embassy's Defense Attache office in order to prepare for the July 2010 multilateral Capstone training exercise, which will showcase Cambodia's increased capacity and expertise. Tea Banh also detailed current and future peacekeeping assistance, stating that Cambodia's PKO work in Sudan has received positive reports. When asked about publicized future operations in Chad and the Central African Republic, Tea Banh indicated that there are some issues to be worked out before Cambodian peacekeepers can be deployed. He said that thus far, 40 members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) have been trained and are prepared for deployment. However, an RCAF observer went to Chad and based on his report, it was determined that the total number of required peacekeepers should be increased from the originally agreed upon 100 to 200. In order for this to happen, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must initiate a new MOU for the increased numbers.

The Road Ahead

15. (SBU) The upcoming meeting between Minister of National Defense Tea Banh and Secretary of Defense Gates marks an

important step forward for both countries. As further evidence of the improved and growing military-to-military relations, the Ambassador introduced the Embassy's new Defense Attache, Col. Mark Gillette, noting that the two countries have an exchange of attaches for the first time in some decades. Col. Gillette will escort Tea Banh to Washington, and both will participate in a portion of the Defense Strategic Review, supported by DoD, prior to meeting with Secretary Gates. The Minister stated that based on a recent bilateral defense dialog held in Hawaii, specific areas for defense reform and continued U.S. engagement include maritime security, border security, humanitarian disaster response, and counterterrorism - an area where the two countries already have close cooperation. Tea Banh stated he is proud of what the two countries have accomplished thus far, and said there remains much work to be done, with reform a key priority.

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